



THOMAS P. DOYLE, J.C.D.,
C.A.D.C.



March 30, 2007

Dr. Frank Page,
President, Southern Baptist Convention
Taylors First Baptist Church,


Dr. Morris Chapman
President, Executive Committee
Southern Baptist Convention


Dear Dr. Page and Dr. Chapman,

In the mid-1980s, I held a very important position with the Catholic Church as an official at the Vatican embassy in Washington D.C. In the course of my duties I was assigned to handle cases of sexual abuse by Catholic priests. I attempted to warn Catholic bishops about the looming clergy sex abuse nightmare. My warning went largely unheeded until 2002, when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops finally established the Office of Child and Youth Protection. By then, countless more kids had been severely wounded, families devastated and the Church itself was reeling from the extensive scandal.

I am concerned by what I fear may be developing as a similar pattern in the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Clergy sex abuse is a scourge that knows no bounds of theology, denomination, or institutional structure. To effectively address this scourge requires a strong cooperative effort. Yet, in recent Baptist Press statements, I have seen that Southern Baptist leaders disclaim that possibility on the ground that the Southern Baptist Convention has "no authority" over autonomous churches. While the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church is undeniably different from the congregational structure of Baptists, you should nevertheless realize that your "no authority" argument is actually quite analogous to what Catholic bishops were espousing prior to 2002. Please know that I have the highest respect for your denomination and its structure and do not make these statements in a critical manner.

To a large degree, a bishop considers himself as having dominion over his own diocese – i.e., as essentially being autonomous. In 2002, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops described it as an "extraordinary and unprecedented" step when they created the Office of Child and Youth Protection. Here are some of their published remarks:

*"Much misunderstanding exists about the structure of the Catholic Church and the way in which it functions both nationally and internationally. The USCCB has **no direct authority over any bishop or eparch in the United States, nor does it have an infrastructure that is interconnected with the management or operations of the country's 194 dioceses and eparchies, each of which is civilly and canonically independent.** In developing the Charter, the members of the USCCB recognized that without traditional oversight mechanisms, **the accountability called for in the Charter would have to be established in a new way.** Thus, the USCCB Office of Child and Youth Protection, created as part of the Charter and monitored by a National Review Board of lay Catholics, was charged with the task of developing appropriate audit mechanisms to ensure that all bishops and eparchs comply with the provisions of the Charter."*

Thus, it would be a mistake to think that the structure of the Catholic Church inherently allowed for the creation of an oversight mechanism. Rather, it was the desperate need for a system of accountability that drove the creation of an oversight mechanism, and that mechanism was created outside the usual structure.

I have worked with a great many clergy abuse victims, and I know the horrible harm that it causes in their lives. I hope you will consider the possibility that, if children in Southern Baptist churches are to be made safer, accountability for Southern Baptist clergy may also need to be established "in a new way."

I was a military chaplain for many years and had the privilege of working side-by-side with many devoted chaplains from your denomination. I learned much from them about the Lord's love and was consistently edified by their dedication to Christ and their zeal for his Gospel message. I hope they and other good ministers of the Lord in your denomination never have to endure the nightmare the Catholic Church finds itself in because of its institutional neglect of the Lord's message.

I am writing not in a spirit of criticism but in a spirit of fraternal hope that you take pains to avoid the incredible harm to your Church that the Catholic Church did not avoid because of its arrogance and obsession with power and image.

I pray that the Lord Jesus guide your hearts that you may find a way to better protect children in the future and to help with healing for those wounded in the past.

Sincerely,

Rev. Thomas Doyle

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION



April 4, 2007

Rev. Thomas P. Doyle, J.C.D., C.A.D.C.
[REDACTED]

Vienna, VA 22182

Dear Rev. Doyle,

Thank you for your kind letter of March 30, 2007. I appreciate the spirit in which you wrote the letter.

Please know that we are taking this issue seriously. We do have some serious limitations due to the polity of our Convention. However, despite what press reports may show, we are involved in reviewing how we might better encourage and inform our churches to protect precious children and young adults.

It is true that the difference is that while Catholic bishops did claim to have "no authority," Southern Baptist leaders truly have no authority over the local church. We do have influence and we are attempting to utilize that influence to the fullest extent to provide this protection.

Thank you for your letter. It is an encouragement to me.

In Christ,

Frank S. Page

FSP/gd

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THOMAS P. DOYLE, J.C.D.,
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April 12, 2007

Rev. Dr. Frank S. Page
[REDACTED]

Dear Rev. Dr. Page,

I am indeed grateful for your kind response to my letter of March 30, 2007. I join you in prayer that the Lord will continue to give you strength and wisdom as you face this problem. I certainly appreciate that the media description may fall short of adequately describing the total response of your Convention.

I suspect that much of the general public's comprehension of clergy sexual abuse is significantly conditioned by the experience of the Roman Catholic Church. I also suspect that in the minds of many, the political structure of one church is the same as any other and this of course, is far short of the reality. I certainly understand the serious limitations you are facing.

I recall some of my fellow Air Force chaplains who were Baptist, explaining to me the governing structure of your denomination. I also recall some very respectful and at the same time enlightening discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of trying to preach the Gospel message from within a hierarchical Church as opposed to a Church without such a political structure.

Several years ago a sociologist of religion named Anson Shupe published a very insightful book entitled In The Name of All That's Holy in which he studied clergy malfeasance within the context of the structures of various denominations. I recall one salient point was that the cover-up and the tendency to self-destructive responses to clergy abuse is much higher with hierarchical churches. My own experience certainly confirms this theory.

Again, thank you for your gracious letter. Know that my hopes and prayers are with you in this very trying time.

Sincerely in Our Lord

(Rev.) Thomas P. Doyle